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ABSTRACT

The factors which contribute to women's vulnerability to rape are a lack of information about and understanding of rape; women's subordinate relationship to men; socially reinforced physical weakness and passivity; isolation from other women; isolation in the community. Prevention means more than just reducing the incidence of rape or providing security for some women. Prevention means eliminating rape so that all women will be free from the threat of assault. Some strategies which all women can implement to reduce our vulnerability include: (1) redefining rape in terms of shared knowledge and experience, thus making rape a public issue; (2) changing the power-dependence relationship between men and women in a patriarchal culture; (3) developing physical strength and skills, and gaining confidence in women's ability to assert their rights; (4) learning to recognize their power as a group; (5) organizing for common defense in neighborhoods and making women's safety a community priority. Women need to continue the work of developing strategies which will increase their strength, mobility, independence and freedom. (Author)

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FREEING OUR LIVES

a feminist analysis of rape prevention

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Threat of Rape

Limitations of Victim Control

Limitations of Rapist Control

Rape Prevention: Ending Women's Vulnerability to Rape

VULNERABILITY: Lack of Information About and Understanding of Rape

STRATEGY: Redefining Rape

Rape Is an Act of Power and Control

Rape Can Happen to All Women

Rape Is Violent, Not Sexual

VULNERABILITY: Women's Subordinate Relationship to Men

Women's Status in Society

Men's Power in Society

Rape as a Means of Control Over Women

Women's Dependence on Men

- for political representation
- for economic support
- for social position
- for physical protection
- for psychological approval

STRATEGY: Altering the Power Relationship Between Women and Men

Through Structural Change

Through the Creation of Alternatives

By Changing the Socialization of Women

- women's physical weakness
- developing strength
- women's learned passivity
- gaining confidence

VULNERABILITY: The Isolation of Women

From Other Women

In the Community

STRATEGY: Organizing

With Other Women

In the Neighborhood

- block organizing
- neighborhood lobbying
- whistle alert
- shelter houses
- community alerts
- watch programs

In the Community

- community awareness programs
- men's role in rape prevention
- community planning
- community agencies

CONCLUSION: Making Rape a Public Issue

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Most rape victims are women. The threat of rape pervades our lives.* Yet, until recently, the issue of rape has been considered inappropriate for action by women. Men have interpreted and responded to rape. Even though men have perpetrated rape and have had minimal reason to fear it themselves, they have developed the social machinery to deal with it. Men have passed the sexual assault laws under which we live, have publicized the known cases, and have led the social reaction to rape. As husbands, fathers and authority figures, men have told women how to avoid rape and have assumed a protective role over us.

The women's anti-rape movement of the 1970's reverses this tradition. Women's groups in many countries are seeking to analyze rape and develop strategies to eliminate it. Women Against Rape in Columbus, Ohio, is part of this movement to stop women's victimization and to plan prevention based on our own experiences of rape. Freeing Our Lives probes the causes and consequences of rape, and suggests ways to stop it. We hope that we and other women will continue this analysis and develop more powerful methods to end rape. The time must come when no woman need fear for her safety and integrity.

THE THREAT OF RAPE

Women learn to fear rape at an early age. Mothers teach daughters not to talk to strangers and not to accept gifts or rides. Parents watch over girls more carefully than boys, who are allowed to roam and to stay out late. As children, we do not know the reasons for parents' protective actions. Only as we grow older is their fear, and ours, identified as the fear of rape.

The fear of rape follows women all of our lives. As a result, we learn to take precautions to avoid rape. We plan our time so we will be home before dark. We make sure the porch light is left on. We recheck locked doors. We even schedule routine chores carefully, knowing that a nighttime trip to a deserted laundry room or a jaunt through the backyard to dump the trash can be hazardous.

Often women do not acknowledge the ways in which rape restricts our lives. Safety considerations often affect a woman's choice of job, transportation, clothing styles and living arrangements. Activities that men take for granted, such as working a night shift, walking alone after dark, or hitchhiking, are riskier for women because of the danger of attack. Every time a woman says to herself, "Perhaps I shouldn't do that; it might not be safe," she is assessing the risk of rape.

The effect of rape is greater than just the effects on victims of actual assaults. Living with fear, being constantly watchful, and restricting our lives over a long period of time damage all women. In this way, we are all victims.

* We deliberately chose the grammatical construction, "Women. ...we/our/us", to include ourselves in the analysis.

Women's fear is a natural, rational response to the pervasive threat of rape. We cannot just pretend the threat does not exist, or try not to be afraid. We must acknowledge both the threat and our fear of rape – then go on to plan prevention strategies to change the social conditions that foster rape.

Traditionally, rape prevention programs have ignored the impact of constant threat on women and have focused only on actual cases of rape. Prevention has been based on controlling either the victim or the rapist. Both victim control and rapist control have severe limitations as prevention strategies.

LIMITATIONS OF VICTIM CONTROL

Victim control, also called "victim avoidance", teaches women to avoid rape: women learn to take various safety precautions and to avoid situations where the probability of attack is presumed to be high. We must not consider this approach a basis for rape prevention. Although caution and security devices save some women from immediate danger, they do nothing to reduce the threat of rape. Even if a woman successfully avoids violence, her knowledge that other women are raped reinforces her own awareness of the threat. This awareness continues to control her activities.

Avoidance has several undesirable consequences as a prevention approach. First, avoidance reinforces women's helplessness. Locking doors and staying in at night give us a temporary sense of relief, but do not make us strong and capable of defending ourselves. Women's helplessness perpetuates our vulnerability to rape. A prevention approach should combat helplessness, not reinforce it.

A second consequence of the avoidance approach is victim blame. If a woman who does not follow avoidance advice is raped, people tend to assume that her lack of caution caused the rape. This assumption shifts the blame for rape from the rapist to the victim. Any approach which burdens the victim with the blame for the attack is unacceptable.

The worst consequence of the victim control strategy is that women must lead circumscribed lives to feel safe. Since every woman is a potential rape victim, victim control programs amount to mass control of women's lives through restriction of our liberty and mobility. This constraint is intolerable in a society that values freedom. We must find a prevention strategy that does not force women to trade freedom for security.

LIMITATIONS OF RAPIST CONTROL

Many people view rape as a crime which can only be effectively combated through the criminal justice system. They encourage stiff penalties to deter potential rapists, and incarceration to remove dangerous offenders from the community. They confuse prosecution with prevention, despite the fact that police and courts enter the scene after a rape has already occurred. Prosecution is intended to redress, not prevent, injustice. In the case of rape, it not only fails to prevent injustice, it cannot redress the full extent of the injury. The prosecution of a few rapists cannot correct the daily injustice to women who may never be raped, but whose lives are damaged by fear.

There is little evidence that punishment serves as a deterrent or that imprisonment includes re-education for rapists. Society has punished rapists for centuries, yet sexual assault against women remains a serious problem. Even if the criminal justice system could work optimally, it would only detain some rapists, not eliminate rape.

RAPE PREVENTION: ENDING WOMEN'S VULNERABILITY TO RAPE

Rape prevention must focus on eliminating the conditions in society which make women easy targets for rape. Our approach is to reduce the threat of rape by eliminating women's vulnerability to it. Our specific prevention strategies evolve from an analysis of the individual, community, and social factors which reinforce each other and maintain women's victimization.

We have identified three areas of vulnerability that maintain women's status as potential rape victims:

- **(1) a lack of information about and understanding of rape;**
- **(2) women's subordinate relationship to men and the resulting characteristics women develop which contribute to our vulnerability;**
- **(3) women's isolation from one another and in the community.**

We will discuss each area as it relates to rape, and then explore strategies for reducing our vulnerability in each area.

Our approach to rape prevention draws on women's long-ignored experience of living with the constant threat of violence. As individuals, we can begin the process of gaining strength, developing skills, and changing our beliefs about ourselves. As a group, women can organize to change the power relationship between women and men, and to reduce our isolation from each other and within our communities.

As women, we must participate in prevention, not because we bear any responsibility for men's attacks, but because we have the most to gain by ending rape. We can only end our victimization through our own actions. We must act responsibly toward ourselves and toward other women to alter the conditions that keep us vulnerable. We can then become strong enough to stop rape.

VULNERABILITY: Lack of Information About and Understanding of Rape

We cannot eliminate rape without thoroughly comprehending the problem. Due to the stigma of being a victim, rape has been a taboo topic. Rather than risk public scorn or loss of reputation, rape victims have often remained silent, coping privately in the aftermath of attack. Only a small proportion of the actual attacks on women are ever reported or publicized. As a result, public awareness of the problem is low and the public's perception of rape is loaded with misconceptions and myths. Anti-rape efforts based on misinformation can never be effective.

To provide accurate information about rape, women have begun to redefine rape in terms of our own experiences. By bringing the topic into the open, we can talk with each other about attacks and about our fears. We can recognize the similarities in our experiences and replace myths with facts.

STRATEGY: Redefining Rape

Women's redefinition of rape includes three major points:

RAPE IS AN ACT OF POWER AND CONTROL

A woman is raped any time she is coerced into performing a sexual act. Coercion may take a variety of forms. It may involve the use of physical force, threats of bodily harm or threats of financial deprivation. Coercion may also appear as a "bargain"; for example, when a man demands that a woman trade her sexual performance for access to a job. The common feature of all these forms of coercion is the abuse of power to control women.

A rapist asserts power by dominating his victim. He violates her spirit as well as her body. By coercing a woman to submit to sexual acts against her will, the rapist attempts to degrade and humiliate her through his denial of her dignity, her freedom of choice, and ultimately, her humanity.

RAPE CAN HAPPEN TO ALL WOMEN

Regardless of age, race, social class, lifestyle or achievement, all women share a single status: that of being potential targets of violence.

Social factors influence the likelihood of attack and often obscure recognition of women's common status. Young women, who best represent the culturally approved standard of "femininity", are the most frequent targets of assault. Young children, older women and the handicapped can seldom defend themselves effectively. Lesbians and single women, who have no permanent relationships with men, are often perceived as unprotected.

Economic conditions and racist attitudes contribute to attacks against black, minority and poor women. Racism within the criminal justice system often denies minority women even the minimal protection afforded to white women. Poor women, living in insecure housing, transient neighborhoods, and high crime areas, are targets of rape more often than middle-class women. Poor women may also engage in riskier activities for day-to-day survival, such as working night shifts, using public transportation or walking.

Inequities which shield some groups of women and leave others more vulnerable impede our understanding of rape as violence against all women. No woman can be safe from rape until rape is no longer a threat for any woman.

RAPE IS VIOLENT, NOT SEXUAL

Because rape is coercive, because it lacks reasonable justification and because it harms the victim, it is a violent act. The harm to the woman may be physical, psychological, economic or social.

The act of rape itself is an assault rather than a sexual interaction between a woman and a man. Sexual activity is simply the rapist's means of dominating and asserting power over the victim. Even if a woman consents under duress or out of fear, she expresses neither a positive choice nor a desire for sexual interaction. For a woman, rape is thus, by definition, an assault.

**This redefinition of rape, based on women's experience of it rather than on legal statutes and cultural myth, forms the basis for realistic rape prevention strategies. We need now to turn to an analysis of the function of rape in society.*

VULNERABILITY: Women's Subordinate Relationship to Men

In addition to redefining the individual act of rape, we need to examine the larger picture of society to determine why rape continues, and why its threat keeps women fearful, dependent on men, and powerless. When we analyze rape in its social context, we are looking beyond individual acts of sexual assault to an explanation of rape as one facet of the typical interactions between women and men.

WOMEN'S STATUS IN SOCIETY

In contemporary society, women occupy a relatively powerless position. Regardless of race, age, social class or wealth, women have fewer advantages and privileges than men with similar backgrounds. Men as a class can acquire substantially more of the resources of our society than women as a class. Men's benefits include greater earning power, and thus more of everything money can buy. Men have easier and sometimes exclusive access to well-paid, satisfying work, and positions of power and influence. Men receive greater psychological and emotional support to attain their personal goals.

MEN'S POWER IN SOCIETY

Men's benefits and privileges are built into a patriarchal system. Through its legal code and institutions, patriarchy ensures women's lower status and our position as potential victims of sexual assault. Patriarchy also provides its own ideology to affirm the natural rights of men to dominate women. The set of beliefs and attitudes that divide people into classes by sex and justify one sex's superiority and control over the other is called sexism. This ideology assigns higher value to the characteristics thought to be possessed naturally by men. Today, while claims of male superiority are more subtle, values and attitudes of our society continue to support believed differences between women and men in ways that reinforce male supremacy.

RAPE AS A MEANS OF CONTROL OVER WOMEN

In patriarchy, men must control women to ensure the continuation of male power and privileges. Rape plays an integral part in maintaining patriarchy by perpetuating the threat of physical violence against women.

This political function of rape is difficult to see in individual cases of rape, where rapists' motivations seem to adopt no pattern. But the overall threat of rape does force women to restrict our lives in order to avoid it. Those of us who challenge the expected behavior patterns for women under patriarchy may even be considered "fair game." For example, the community may tolerate the rape of a hitchhiker because she has not obeyed the conventions for her protection. The myth that women are responsible for rape camouflages the political function of control and diverts attention from the group that actually benefits from rape.

Many men are never physically violent toward women and do not see how they benefit from rape. Likewise, rapists may not be aware of the political nature of their crime. Yet, the fact is that just a few violent men can terrorize all women. The indifference of many other men reinforces this effect. Our culture's view of men as aggressive, women's knowledge of the actual use of physical violence by some men against some women, society's ineffective efforts to curb such violence, and every woman's status as potential victim interact to create a real threat. Men's domination of women is not likely to be challenged in such an environment. Once this threat is established, men's privileges and status are secure. When all women are afraid to live freely and independently, we have little hope of successfully claiming our rights.

WOMEN'S DEPENDENCE ON MEN

Women receive most of our benefits through men rather than through our own ability to exercise power and control over our lives. Our dependence on men was greatest when we had no alternatives for independent survival. Recently, pressure from the women's movement has opened some alternatives to women. However, many of us must still depend on men for political representation, economic support, social position, physical protection, or psychological approval.

The existence of this dependence is reinforced by the cultural ideal of dependence as a "womanly" trait. In fulfilling that ideal, women develop characteristics assumed to be natural – a circular process that creates arguments difficult to counter. For example, when women depend on men for protection, we do not develop our own physical strength and stamina. Our lack of development then becomes evidence that women are naturally weaker than men and need to be protected.

The perceptions and attitudes that society promotes regarding women in general affect each one of us, regardless of our individual skills. An employer may deny a night job to a woman with self-defense skills, for example, if s/he assumes that all women are weak. As long as people maintain a perception of women as powerless, every individual woman will be expected to fit the category of victim despite her acquisition of skills and capabilities.

Just as we must redefine rape in terms of our own experiences before we can end our vicitimization, so must we also explore the various aspects of our dependence on men in order to develop appropriate strategies for altering our subordinate status and eliminating the threat of rape.

• *for political representation*

Today, women have demanded more representation than we once had. However, men continue to control forums where policy is set — in legislatures, courts, committees and public offices. Women as a group lack access to or participation in institutional decision-making that affects our lives. With little input in government, women remain a political minority.

Lacking the power to represent our own interests, we must depend on men to consider our needs. No group should have to depend on another group's goodwill or charity for their rights, especially when their group interests conflict. For example, in the United States women are dependent on men to grant us equal protection under the Constitution.

• *for economic support*

Women's economic dependence on men is a crucial factor in our victimization. When we cannot provide for our own food, clothing and shelter, we are in a poor strategic position to make demands of those who supply us with life's necessities.

On the individual level, the vast majority of women either rely on husbands or fathers for support, or earn low incomes. As wives and daughters, many of us are trapped in desperate family situations filled with abuse and violence. We think that the way out of domestic dependence and violence is to become self-supporting. But when women enter the world of paid work, we usually find ourselves dependent on men – and frequently subject to sexual harassment – all over again.

The jobs to which women have traditionally had access pay us little (on the average, 58% of men's earnings in 1977), and offer us little opportunity for enrichment or advancement. We usually work at occupations with little control over the conceptualization and organization of production– secretaries, retail clerks, mass production workers, dental assistants, waitresses. Since this labor does not involve decision-making and control, employers value it less, and in an economic crunch women are among the first to be laid off. Often women have no choice but to drop out of the labor market, because of the lack of low-cost childcare facilities and flexible job scheduling. The most crucial years of a person's career development are precisely the years in which women are expected to go home and raise children.

Women's dependence on male bosses for work frequently results in sexual harassment and coercion on the job. Many women actively seek marriage as an alternative to the drudgery, financial insecurity and degradation of the work world, just as many married women seek work for fulfillment and independence. Thus society offers us unpaid domestic labor as the alternative to poor jobs, and poor jobs as the alternative to work at home, disguising our "options" as matrimonial bliss and upwardly mobile careerism.

Finally, we can add welfare to women's economic "options." Welfare is simply another form of economic dependence. Most welfare recipients are women, and many have dependent children. The meagerness of welfare support is directly intended as an incentive to get a job, and presumably improve one's status. But many women who seek work to end dependence on welfare either cannot find jobs, or must accept poorly paid, unsatisfying employment.

The bleak economic picture for millions of individual women adds up to a grim one indeed for the collective women's movement. We have tremendous difficulty sustaining the feminist movement financially, much less moving it forward. We pit our miniscule treasuries against the resources of giant corporations and big government. Only rarely can a feminist group offer a living wage to a worker. Thus we perpetuate volunteerism among women, and "burn out" even our most dedicated workers. The nationwide rape crisis center and rape prevention movement is but one arm of women's liberation that can eloquently attest to this difficulty.

In our society, women's organizations must inevitably compete with each other for an occasional dole from a business foundation or government board. Often, seeking or accepting money from sources controlled by men entails disavowal of basic feminist principles – we try to improve women's lives by agreeing not to ask for what we want! Co-optation has caused many women's groups to limit their objectives to dead-end liberal reforms, support-

ing the myth that our society's institutions can fill our needs — for instance, stop rape — without major structural change.

• *for social position*

Historically, the father's or husband's position in the community determined a woman's social standing in the community. Women, as a form of male property, had no independent status. In return for support, men dictated what services they expected from us.

Even today, few women achieve social recognition in our own right. We still lose our separate identities after marriage. A woman assumes her husband's name and residence, and is generally referred to by her relationship with her family — for example, John's wife, mother of three. A woman may achieve limited social recognition as a volunteer for church groups, schools and social services. However, people usually consider this involvement secondary to her principal role as a wife and mother. Many people also view an employed woman's commitment to family as more significant than her commitment to her work outside the home. Women's invisibility as an independent social class makes it extremely difficult for us to organize to challenge men's power.

• *for physical protection*

As long as women are physically weak, our ability to provide for our own security is limited. Usually, we rely upon men for protection. Thus women depend on the same group of people which includes rapists. Women must continually make judgments about which men to trust, while taking precautions against those who cannot be trusted.

Since we can seldom be sure which men are trustworthy, women learn to appease all men in order to minimize the possibility of violence and to secure protection. We placate men by deferring to them in conversation, by speaking softly and by smiling often. We hesitate to confront men and giggle nervously instead. When making statements, we avert our eyes. All of these behaviors communicate to men that we pose no serious challenge to them.

The protection which men offer in return is really a system of controls which keep women weak and dependent. Some men may protect us, but they can withdraw that protection any time if women step out of line. If women displease men or act "uppity", the implied threat of violence is a control, which gives women the uneasy feeling that former protectors may join the aggressors at any time.

If men were really concerned about women's safety, they would be pleased when we are able to defend ourselves. Strong women, however, threaten men's ability to control us; and men often respond to us with contempt, ridicule, and violence. Apparently, women's protection is only men's concern when it rests in their hands.

• *for psychological approval*

Since women have few alternatives for independent survival, we must please men to obtain protection and economic security. Women strive for

male approval by attempting to fit definitions of female beauty, sexuality and roles which satisfy men's needs. We often dress and act in ways we think men will like, rather than in ways that feel comfortable to us. Industries base much of their profit on appealing to women's dependence. "Gentlemen prefer Hanes" is only one example of many similar advertising ploys.

Images of women as sexual objects saturate our media and popular culture. Advertising often deliberately obscures what is for sale: the product or the woman's body that is used to promote it to male customers. Men set up unrealistic sexual standards for women, who must walk the fine line between looking sexually alluring to secure male approval, while appearing chaste to earn male protection.

Many women have become male-identified and enforce these standards on ourselves and other women. The need for male approval often results in women's distrust of our own perceptions and ideas. We frequently absorb sexist notions that women are inferior and unable to decide matters for ourselves. We often develop low self-esteem and lack of confidence in our own and other women's abilities.

STRATEGY: Altering the Power Relationship Between Women and Men

If we can see ourselves and women we know in the above description of woman's place in our society, then the necessity for altering the power relationship between women and men becomes clear. As long as our culture approves women's dependence, we remain the perfect victims. In fact, women have gained more independence today than ever before but, as a group, we have not yet organized to insist on social changes that fit our new circumstances. For example, when "victim avoidance" advocates advise women living alone to leave our first names off mailboxes and phone listings, they encourage us to efface ourselves. Such actions isolate us from each other, rather than encouraging us to insist on better treatment.

To overcome women's dependence, we must organize ourselves. Women need strategies for eliminating patriarchy. We need to develop alternatives that will free us now from further dependence on men. We need to overcome the characteristics that keep us weak and defenseless. Vulnerability will not end with individual change; it depends on social change as well.

THROUGH STRUCTURAL CHANGE

Women's dependence on men is the aspect of women's vulnerability most difficult to change. We must plan rape prevention strategies with the recognition that society shapes our attitudes and behaviors. Individual women can change our lives and reduce our dependence only within the limits of the present social structure. Since our dependence is built into the system of patriarchy, only a complete change in the structure of society will free us from the status of potential rape victims. To eliminate rape, we must eliminate patriarchy with its assumption of male superiority. Structural change is a lengthy but crucial process.

We must first recognize rape as a women's political issue, because it is women who are the victims and women who are threatened. Rape is political because it is used to keep us powerless and to secure the status quo of male domination. The fight against rape is linked to other struggles for women's freedom in all aspects of our lives.

Recognition of rape as a women's political issue is a crucial first step toward organizing to fight it. As a political group, women currently have minority status. We are unorganized and politically ineffective. While each of us can grow individually stronger, only by exercising our strength in numbers can we force fundamental change. The commonalities of women's oppression cut across the race, age and class lines which have obscured a recognition of our mutual struggle. We need to organize to improve our bargaining power in society, so that our needs become a priority. As a unified block, we will be strong enough to demand an end to the system which keeps us vulnerable to rape.

THROUGH THE CREATION OF ALTERNATIVES

Legislative reform can provide the precondition for structural change, but structural change requires more than just passing a law. It requires altering the patterns of interaction between people – an actual change in the power relationship between women and men. We must create alternatives that structure relationships differently.

The more alternatives women can create, the less we must live in forced dependence on men. Feminists have begun to develop social and economic alternatives, including support networks that help to redefine women's images of ourselves and to alleviate problems faced daily by women. A women's culture celebrates a positive image of women as independent persons. Consciousness-raising groups, for example, have given women a supportive atmosphere in which to free ourselves of crippling stereotypes and to develop confidence – a freedom and confidence which have formed a basis for redefining ourselves on our own terms and for organizing to re-educate the public.

In such areas as education, health care, rape, and the media, alternative services offered by women for women have facilitated women's recognition that we possess the power to make significant changes in our lives now. These services have fulfilled a dual function as focal points for demanding more control of existing institutions and as models for structural change. As women gain skills and strength, we gradually expand our organizing to include more complex projects.

The feminist movement has barely begun to create alternatives for economic support, although a few feminist businesses and credit unions currently exist. We need to experiment with new, fair ways to organize work, distribute money and resources, and increase women's ability to provide living wages for ourselves.

Much work remains in all areas to continue expanding our alternatives. We cannot wait for men to give up their privileges. We must create our own spaces. Our successes will encourage other women to join us.

BY CHANGING THE SOCIALIZATION OF WOMEN

Our society's patterns of training females produce adult women who are physically and emotionally unequipped to respond effectively to danger. Our training reinforces our dependence. If we are to reduce our dependence, then we must retrain ourselves.

• *women's physical weakness*

Even though most women are smaller than most men, size alone need not be decisive in physical confrontations. Women's lack of physical development and training renders us vulnerable to assault. Physical activity, which is encouraged for boys, is not stressed for girls. Even if girls are active in their early years, different standards of muscular development and stamina apply to girls and boys at puberty. Schools and parents usually channel girls and boys into different physical activities. Boys develop strength and coordination, while girls learn grace and figure control. By early teens, boys have firmly established their physical superiority over girls.

Most adult women get little physical exercise and have little strength and endurance. We may participate in a few sports, such as tennis and swimming, but leave athletics – particularly team sports – largely to men. Few of us have jobs which require physical strength, such as construction. We wear clothing styles which restrict our movement. Fashionable shoe styles like clogs, high heels, platforms and flimsy sandals hamper our ability to run and kick. We are easy targets for assault when we are unprepared to resist or escape.

Women rarely receive any training for our own defense. Not many of us participate in boxing, wrestling, or military training. Consequently, few women know how or where to direct our energy to be effective fighters, while most men acquire basic fighting skills, formally or informally.

Because women have not had much experience with rough-and-tumble play or contact sports, we underestimate the amount of physical force the body can withstand. We are thus unable to gauge our own bodies' resistance to injury during a struggle; one blow may be enough to discourage us from further fighting.

• *developing strength*

Some women have begun to overcome physical weakness by learning self-defense or studying a martial art. We can then share our skills with other women. Time and money limit this option for many of us, but we can join together to demand better physical education programs, including self-defense in our schools. Women who work in high-risk areas can petition employers to provide on-the-job self-defense instruction.

To develop physical strength and skills, women can organize team sports with friends and co-workers. Employers or unions often will sponsor women's teams. We can urge friends to attend sports events that promote equal participation and prize money for women athletes. We can also demand serious coverage of women's events by local sportscasters. In this way, we can promote a positive image of physical training for women and encourage girls to get involved in athletics.

• *women's learned passivity*

Women's emotional training contributes to our inability to fight back successfully. Women learn to be passive, gentle and accepting. We are taught always to consider other people's feelings above our own. While these are desirable human qualities everyone should have in moderation, women's exclusive training in these qualities leaves us defenseless. We are not encouraged to assert ourselves or to be independent. When faced with a direct threat, we often lack the confidence necessary for an effective defense. Our physical weakness reinforces feelings of helplessness and inferiority. Confronted by an attacker, we often react in the only way we know – passively and ineffectively.

Women tend to have a strong aversion to violence, fights and weapons. We must recognize that non-violence is no longer a virtue when it keeps us victimized. In life-and-death situations, when women must fight back, the mental blocks against hurting another person may prevent us from protecting ourselves. We may acknowledge the effectiveness of gouging out an attacker's eye, but fear to do so because we will permanently disable him. This self-destructive compassion for the assailant is a learned response that interferes with an effective defense. Our hesitancy to inflict pain is inappropriate when our lives are at stake.

Rapists prey on women they know they can intimidate. Similarly, wolf whistlers and obscene phone callers want a reaction of humiliation, embarrassment, or fear. When women respond like victims, by averting our eyes, smiling at the most insulting remarks, appearing frightened, or blushing, such men have accomplished their objectives. A woman submitting to these smaller insults may find herself in progressively more dangerous situations as she becomes more fearful and less capable of protecting herself.

For many reasons, women are often reluctant to challenge a man's offensive behavior. We are so accustomed to lewd remarks and harassment that these incidents seem normal. We convince ourselves that such sexist behavior is too petty to waste time challenging, or we fail to challenge it for fear of ridicule. We give men the benefit of the doubt, hoping they are just being friendly. But ignoring harassment only confirms men's assumed right to comment on women's bodies. If women choose to overlook such comments only because we lack the assertiveness to confront men and to insist upon respect, we essentially have no choice at all.

When we see ourselves as victims, we feel powerless. This discourages us from taking active measures to improve our situation. We need to break this self-perpetuating cycle. We must redefine ourselves in terms of our strengths rather than our weaknesses and refuse to be victims.

• *gaining confidence*

Women trained in self-defense rarely need to use our skills, since our self-confident demeanor may discourage an attacker from tangling with us. All women can cultivate a confident and competent image. We must walk with our heads up, stay alert, and project our willingness to deal with those who challenge us. We must learn to meet the eyes of men who attempt

to harass, demean or insult us. Our bearing can convey that we are proud individuals who demand to be treated with dignity and respect -- the same respect that men take for granted for themselves. Men must realize that we will hold them responsible when their behavior offends us.

Women need to learn direct, honest and appropriate responses which reflect a seriousness of purpose and a refusal to be intimidated in harassment situations. Confrontation training can be a valuable tool to overcome passivity. This technique, similar to assertiveness training, can be used by small groups of women. A few friends or co-workers can role-play harassing and potentially dangerous situations which individuals have experienced. In the supportive atmosphere of the group, each woman can practice assertive responses and receive feedback to strengthen those responses and to increase her self-reliance. Confrontation training should be a part of high school and college programs.

21

The value of assertiveness and self-confidence is not limited to self-defense situations. Women must present our concerns in a manner which clearly relates our unwillingness to be intimidated, manipulated, or argued out of legitimate positions. We need to be ready and willing to defend our interest in physical safety, job security or civil rights.

VULNERABILITY: The Isolation of Women

The third area of women's vulnerability to rape is our isolation. In addition to our lack of accurate knowledge about rape and our subordinate relationship to men, we are isolated in many ways that leave us more vulnerable: isolated from one another, in our neighborhoods, and in the larger community.

Despite the fact that rape affects women as a group, individual women have been forced to find personal solutions to assault. Only recently are we beginning to develop collective strategies to eliminate rape.

FROM OTHER WOMEN

Much of our isolation stems from attitudes about women which negate the importance of women relating to one another. Often two women will be asked, "Are you girls alone?" The questioner obviously defines "alone" as "without a man" and fails to recognize any value in women being together. The woman who cancels plans with female friends when she gets a date displays the same attitude.

Women are socialized to compete with each other for male approval. Competition among women creates distrust, dislike and insincerity, which deter us from joining together to work on common problems. The support that women do give each other most often takes the form of mutual commiseration, dwelling on our weaknesses. Projecting our own weaknesses onto other women, we often do not see each other as sources of aid in threatening situations.

Racism keeps black and white women from recognizing our common struggle against rape. Historically, white men and women brought false charges of rape against black men and used them as an excuse for lynchings and legal executions. Fear of lynching kept blacks from asserting their rights. The rape of black women by white men was another tool of tyranny to subjugate blacks. The media continues selectively to publicize attacks by black men against white women, despite statistical evidence that most rapes are committed by men against women of the same race.

The stigma of being a rape victim and the fear of assault both undermine women's solidarity. Many women are afraid to deal realistically with our inability to protect ourselves. Just as cigarette smokers skip over articles on cancer, many women psychologically distance ourselves from the threat of rape by adopting an "it can't happen to me" attitude. Women often prefer to believe victims were unworthy of protection or were careless and therefore "different". These beliefs maintain false distinctions of "good" and "bad" among women and imply we are not responsible for one another's safety.

BING
23

IN THE COMMUNITY

Women are not only isolated from one another, but we are also isolated in our communities. The community's reluctance to interfere with the "privacy of the family" reinforces domestic isolation. Consequently, a battered wife or a woman raped by a family member cannot easily mobilize the necessary support. The clearest example of isolation in the family is that no state allows a woman to report or prosecute a rape by her husband. In this context, wife battering, child molesting and rape remain hidden crimes.

With so many factors enforcing the adage "A woman's place is in the home," women tend to be displaced from the mainstream of community decision-making. While almost everyone publicly deplores rape, there is little concrete evidence of a real commitment to stop it. Male-dominated community agencies tend to handle the threat of rape by ignoring it. For example, city planners often disregard women's safety. Bus routes, bus stops and street lighting are seldom organized with consideration of our well-being. Dark streets, remote bus stops, and other dangerous features of the environment dramatically increase the physical risk to women.

STRATEGY: Organizing

WITH OTHER WOMEN

Women can overcome many situations of individual powerlessness by recognizing and utilizing the power of numbers. When a woman objects to being harassed or degraded, she should be able to count on other women for support. In workplaces, classrooms, social situations, and on the street, women need to support each others' intolerance of sexual abuse and harassment. This support can come on an ad hoc basis from other women who are present, or in a more organized way through confrontation groups. If a man is harassing women, we can rally a few friends and confront the man to let him know that his behavior offends us as women, and will not be tolerated.

Women can also support each other by sharing information about our assault experiences. Through discussion, we often find we have undergone similar experiences or have had common patterns of reaction to assault. Knowing this, we can plan more effective defenses. For example, women take numerous precautions against rape by strangers, not knowing that we need to create defenses against the more common cases of rape by dates, relatives, friends or acquaintances. In some cases, we discover the same man has been continually molesting a group of friends, women in the same neighborhood, or family members. By sharing information, we can destroy his anonymity and hold him responsible.

Women can remove the barriers dividing us by forming consciousness-raising groups. Small groups provide a forum for us to identify and overcome sexist and racist attitudes in ourselves as well as others. When women meet regularly to share experiences and to provide the support necessary to make changes in our lives, we develop an analysis of common problems. We develop trust in each other and confidence in our collective strength.

A part of our isolation results from a lack of knowledge about where to look for other women to provide support or to take action with us. Not only rape, but childcare, women's health care, and abortion are among issues of concern to women that have served as a focus for organizing groups. Most of these groups welcome the participation of new members. Additionally, most rape crisis centers can provide information to interested women about how to set up similar groups.

IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Women can organize in several ways for mutual support in a neighborhood, and to command public attention to women's safety needs. Circulating general information about rape prevention raises residents' awareness. Women can organize meetings among ourselves to discuss specific safety problems. Interested residents can design educational programs to promote prevention.

- *block organizing*

An individual or small group of women can begin by visiting neighbors and discussing neighborhood safety. These visits provide an opportunity to interact with other women and to distribute literature about rape prevention and community anti-rape programs available from local anti-rape groups.

If women express an interest in rape prevention, one or a few women can arrange a block meeting to plan ways to organize the neighborhood. Creating an awareness of women's safety issues among the neighbors may take time. Organizers must continue to keep them informed of community meetings and rape prevention programs.

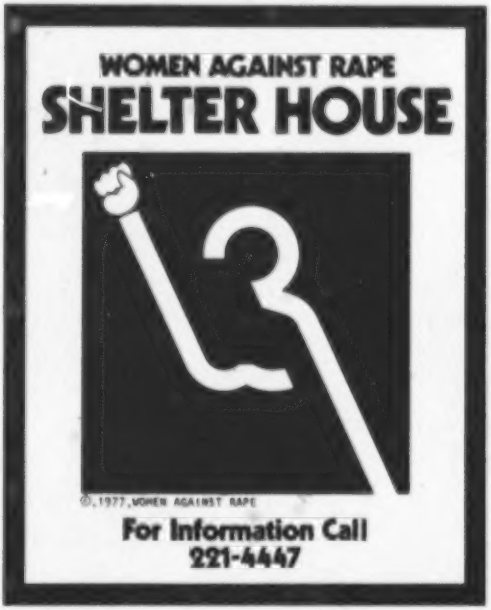
- *neighborhood lobbying*

Neighbors might prefer to begin by writing letters to the editors of local newspapers or to legislators demanding better street lighting, reforms in rape laws or self-defense in the schools. Whatever the involvement, it should serve as a starting point for large-scale organizing as awareness grows.

- *whistle alert*

Whistle Alert is a community rape prevention program which depends on the active involvement of all residents. Women carry whistles when we are on the street, and keep whistles in strategic places in homes. If threatened or attacked, a woman blows her whistle. The sound of a whistle calls for help. People who hear a whistle blow their own whistles and go immediately to assist the woman.

To be effective, Whistle Alert needs the support of an informed and involved community. With such support, the program can increase women's mobility and independence in the neighborhood, while emphasizing the importance of each individual's responsibility for women's safety.



• *shelter houses*

With the support of a local Rape Crisis Center or a Women Against Rape organization, women can organize for mutual support within a neighborhood by establishing a Women's Shelter House program. One woman in the neighborhood makes her house available as a temporary refuge to women who have been threatened or assaulted. The house displays a special identifying emblem which can be seen easily from the street. The resident is trained to provide information and support to women who come to her door. She provides a telephone for necessary calls, and she notifies the local rape crisis center when her home has been used for shelter. The center can note patterns of attack and in turn notify neighborhood support groups.

• *community alerts*

A neighborhood can initiate communication networks from house to house to spread the word about a potentially dangerous situation or to call residents into action. Each area can develop a telephone list of all women in the neighborhood, and a system for telephoning each woman on the list. The same system can serve other purposes: women who have been harassed or threatened may call someone in the network for reassurance and comfort. Using such a system, women can make arrangements to spend nights in each other's houses, rather than stay alone when we become frightened.

• *watch programs*

Women who live in especially dangerous neighborhoods, or who need protection from a particular rapist known to be in a neighborhood, can organize neighborhood patrol programs. Since a program of this type requires careful planning, security, and coordination of volunteers, it should only be attempted in emergency situations and with the assistance of experienced community organizers.

IN THE COMMUNITY

• *community awareness programs*

Public education about rape and rape prevention is an on-going need. Community silence indicates tolerance of sexual assault. Community awareness programs, organized by local residents, combat the threat of violence against women by making information and resources available to every member of a neighborhood.

Many different activities can promote community education: speakers bureaus, television and radio messages, distribution of pamphlets, school programs and workshops. Women Against Rape, Columbus, Ohio and rape crisis centers in other cities have materials and resource lists available for organizing such programs. *

* For information on local rape crisis centers and anti-rape groups, write to: THE NATIONAL RAPE INFORMATION CLEARINGHOUSE, National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape, Room 10C03, Parklawn Building, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, Maryland 20857.

• *men's role in rape prevention*

The ultimate responsibility for rape lies with men. First, it is men who rape, brutalize, and humiliate women, whether through physical assault or verbal harassment. Second, in personal relationships, men reinforce women's dependence when they deny various kinds of support to women who try to move beyond our narrowly prescribed role. Finally, men control the social structure which assures women's continued victimization.

Men's rape prevention efforts must address these three areas of responsibility. Men must change their stereotypical attitudes and refrain from actions which dehumanize and devalue women. In doing so, they reject the requirements of their own stereotype to be dominant and aggressive. They can begin to deal with women as autonomous people. Men need to pressure their peers to stop sexist behavior and to express their personal disapproval of their traditional competition with each other to put women down.

Men must honestly examine their personal interactions with women and acknowledge ways in which they have intimidated women or contributed to our helplessness. For example, if a man has denied a woman affection, moral or financial support, or protection chiefly to undermine her efforts at independence, he must recognize this denial as a power play, and stop it.

To stop upholding patriarchal social structures, men must strive to understand a feminist analysis of society. Men must scrutinize all their ideas and actions in order to change those which are oppressive. We are calling upon men for radical change no less than we are calling upon women. Men need to acknowledge the benefits they have derived from dominating women, and give them up. They must be supportive of women's work to change the social structure which upholds male privileges.

• *community planning*

If women organize to increase our strength through numbers, we can develop policy that promotes women's mobility. Women should help determine city and university landscaping, parking arrangements, pedestrian malls, transportation systems and street lighting plans. We can participate through formal service on committees or in offices, and through organizing public pressure groups. Women can either use existing regulations, or develop new legislation where needed.

• *community agencies*

Communities can pressure agencies charged with the public welfare to respond to rape victims with care and sensitivity. Women can urge health care units, social service agencies and the criminal justice system to develop programs to ease the problems experienced by rape victims.

In all these efforts, organizers should insure recognition of rape as a women's political issue, not just another crime or mental health problem. For example, women can seek funding for independent rape crisis centers, to provide victims with peer support and to promote a collective women's approach to rape prevention.

CONCLUSION: Making Rape a Public Issue

The feminist movement has developed an analysis of rape explaining its widespread existence as an outcome of a patriarchal social structure. Rape prevention thus calls for fundamental change in the relationship between women and men. Women have developed strategies to bring about this long-term change while also making significant progress in reducing our vulnerability **now**.

However, women can progress only to the extent that we can draw public attention to the issue of rape. We must change the private nature of rape. Because of the rape stigma, few women make their experiences public, so that available information refutes the myths only in limited fashion. More women must confront the community's skepticism and relate our experiences openly.

When the issue of rape becomes more public, we can use our new knowledge to demonstrate the scope of the problem. We will have a firmer basis for demanding that rape prevention become a high priority for community agencies. We can require accountability from all segments of our communities, and begin to change the community conditions that perpetuate rape.

Finally, our greater knowledge will promote a fuller analysis of rape. We will learn how best to change our society to stop rape. We will develop ways to gain greater freedom in our own lives.

We must continually draw more women into the struggle against rape. When we present a united front, we can secure our demands to live in a society that does not force us to compromise our freedom.

SUMMARY

The factors which contribute to women's vulnerability to rape are:

1. *a lack of information about and understanding of rape;*
2. *women's subordinate relationship to men;*
3. *socially reinforced physical weakness and passivity;*
4. *isolation from other women;*
5. *isolation in the community.*

Prevention means more than just reducing the incidence of rape or providing security for some women. Prevention means eliminating rape so that all women will be free from the threat of assault. Some strategies which all women can implement to reduce our vulnerability include:

1. *redefining rape in terms of our own shared knowledge and experience; making rape a public issue.*
2. *changing the power-dependence relationship between men and women in a patriarchal culture;*
3. *developing physical strength and skills, and gaining confidence in our ability to assert our rights;*
4. *learning to recognize our power as a group;*
5. *organizing for our common defense in neighborhoods and making women's safety a community priority.*

We need to continue the work of developing strategies which will:

BUILD WOMEN'S STRENGTH;

EXTEND WOMEN'S MOBILITY;

PROMOTE WOMEN'S INDEPENDENCE;

GUARANTEE WOMEN'S FREEDOM.